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American Imago, Volume 68, Number 3, Fall 2011, pp. 568-578 (Review)

AMERICAN
IMAGO

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
THE HUMAN SCIENCES
Volume 68 Number 3

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2011.0030>

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Terror, Transformation, and Conceptualization in the Americas, South and North

Uprooted Minds: Surviving the Politics of Terror in the Americas. Nancy Cairo Hollander. New York: Routledge, 2010. xxiii + 403 pp.

Review by Stephen Soldz

Over its history, psychoanalysis has had a complex relationship to both the political left and social activism. Originally viewed as avant-garde, early psychoanalysis was often associated with radical and bohemian movements. It was not by accident that the anarchist Emma Goldman was among Freud's audience at Clark University, that the Bloomsbury authors were interested in it, or that the first academic chair in psychoanalysis was at Budapest Medical School during the Communist Bela Kun's four months in power in 1919. And, as Jacoby (1983) explained, an impressive number of second-generation, European analysts were men and women of the cultural and political left, a significant minority of whom identified with the radical Left.

At the same time, historically, few psychoanalysts have simultaneously been social activists. The most well known exception was Wilhelm Reich, who organized the SexPol (Sexual Politics) movement in early 1930's Germany (Reich, 1972). By and large, however, like many left-wing intellectuals, at least in the United States and Europe, those psychoanalysts attracted to left-wing ideas wrote social critiques and theorized about social change, while leaving actual activism to others.

This book, *Uprooted Minds: Surviving the Politics of Terror in the Americas*, calls attention to groups of Latin American psychoanalysts who in the 1970s constituted major exceptions to this divorce between theory and practice. These analysts pursued social change with the same passion that they learned and practiced psychoanalysis. Author Nancy Hollander complements her account of Latin American psychoanalytic activism and its political and social contexts with a discussion of neo-liberal and authoritarian tendencies in post-9/11 United States and nascent efforts by psychoanalytic activists here to put their

psychoanalytic ideas at the service of social change at the center of the empire.

Hollander brings impeccable credentials to her task. In addition to being a psychoanalyst and psychologist, she is a Professor Emerita of Latin American history and a social activist, with experience reaching broad audiences as a filmmaker and decade-long public radio host. Drawing on these multiple talents, the core of the book consists of oral histories of small groups of radical psychoanalysts from Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile who were active before, during, and after repressive U.S.-backed dictatorships came to power in their home countries. Hollander supplements these personal histories with sections enlightening readers about the history of Latin America in the last fifty years. These sections cover struggles over differing models of economic development, the possibility of radical social change in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the imposition of repressive policies and authoritarian measures leading to military coups. The post-coup dictatorships used terror as their major tool of social control, resulting in rampant human rights abuses, including the political killing of thousands and the systematic torture of tens of thousands.

The potential for change countered by massive repression and terror provided the context in which the radical psychoanalysts interviewed by Hollander lived and worked and dreamed and feared. In the heady days when it seemed that radical action could move their societies in more egalitarian, just, and democratic directions, these activists strove to develop a radical theory and praxis in which psychoanalysis was an element of social transformation. They created psychoanalytically informed, community based programs in workplaces and poor communities. They treated activists and revolutionaries, including in some cases members of underground groups like the Uruguayan Tupamaro and Argentine Montonero guerillas. During the dictatorships they experienced terror, often accompanied by arrest, torture, and exile. When the dictatorships fell, they and their fellow citizens in newly democratic states confronted not only the neo-liberal economic order that accompanied the new regimes, but also a climate of impunity that surrounded past abuses. Simultaneously with these broader struggles, these

analyst-activists fought the psychoanalytic establishment to encourage the inclusion of social perspectives in psychoanalytic thinking and training. And they used psychoanalytic theory to understand the changing nature of their societies.

The grandmother and most influential of these activists was the towering figure of Marie Langer, an Austrian psychoanalyst who received her analytic training in Vienna before providing healthcare for the Republican army in the Spanish Civil War. When the Spanish Republic's defeat seemed inevitable and war clouds spread over Europe, Langer and her husband Max fled to Uruguay and then to Argentina, where she helped develop the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association. She later split from this APA in the early 1970s when Langer and her colleagues' attempt to create a socially engaged psychoanalysis found itself unwelcome in an increasingly conservative organization. Even before the 1976 military coup that destroyed formal democracy in Argentina, Langer again was forced into exile—this time in Mexico—after receiving word that her name was listed as one of those marked for execution by the increasingly active right-wing death squads that were decimating leftist and liberal forces throughout the country in advance of the military coup. Later, when the Sandinista revolution swept into power in Nicaragua, Langer became active in efforts in that country to create a community mental health system based on psychoanalytic principles.

In addition to Langer, Hollander, through her accounts of intensive interviews over decades, follows the development of a few psychoanalytic activists in each of her target countries. Among the many moving stories relayed by Hollander is that of Argentine psychoanalyst Julia Braun who became politically active in high school and was imprisoned for four and a half months in 1954 when her medical school's Student Center was banned during the final days of the Peronist government. Braun reports that this early prison experience made her more cautious than some of her colleagues. Nonetheless, she never abandoned her radical views. In 1971, she was completing her training through the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association when this APA was split, ending in the exodus of many of the social activists, including Marie Langer. Braun decided to stay.

In the early 1970s, Braun remained a relatively passive sympathizer of progressive efforts. As pre-coup repression advanced and as the death squad activity that had forced Langer into exile spread, Braun grew fearful that her adolescent son Gabriel was being foolhardy in his activist activities. Her pleadings for caution and her son's rejections of them led to family confrontations that on the surface will seem familiar to many. As Braun reflected during her conversations with Hollander:

It was such a contradiction. Gabriel would tell us that we were hypocrites, that he was only actualizing the political principles that he had learned from us. And he was right. Our position was difficult to defend. I respected his commitment to the values of justice and equality that we had always upheld. He argued that we couldn't teach him one set of values and then ask him to be a traitor to his ideals and his comrades. Like all the young people he criticized us for our bourgeoisification (p. 94).

In 1975 repression and fear spread throughout Argentine society. The economy was in crisis. The death squads published lists of targets in newspaper ads. Victims received phone calls or letters warning them to leave or face assassination. Eventually Braun and her husband received a 3:00 AM call announcing that Gabriel had joined the *desaparecidos*, those seized and disappeared by security forces. Husband and wife began the frantic search for their son while themselves facing fear that the security forces would come to arrest them or their younger son. They destroyed hundreds of books that would provide evidence of their progressive sympathies.

Thus began the ordeal that faced tens of thousands throughout much of Latin America in that decade, the endless search for the missing, accompanied with the terror of imagining the torture they were receiving. Family members went from police station to police station, from one bureaucratic office to another, seeking word of their loved ones' whereabouts, only to be met with denials that they were even in custody. In Gabriel's case, as in that of so many other Argentine cases, there would be no return. After two years, Braun became convinced that

her son was dead, a conviction confirmed only years later, long after the fall of the dictatorship.

Realizing that her son was likely dead, Braun felt the need to express her grief through activism. She joined a community health project for Argentine and immigrant workers organized by a progressive priest and a pediatrician who was among the lucky ones released after his arrest and torture in 1975. Braun discovered that providing psychological help for those who suffered at the bottom of society was therapeutic also for her. Later, in post-dictatorship Argentina, the Ministry of Health tapped Braun as director of psychological services for the families of the *desaparecidos*. She also worked with the Ministry to develop programs providing psychological services to schoolchildren traumatized by the climate of societal violence that persisted during the democratic transition.

The psychoanalyst-activists chronicled by Hollander used psychoanalytic theory to comprehend the terror-based societies that they endured with so many millions of others. They were faced with the question of how to understand psychoanalytically the conditions and consequences of the panic that permeated these societies. The dictatorships had adopted a strategy of inducing society-wide fear through the arrest and torture of thousands of people—not only known opponents, but also those who were just in the wrong place or seen with the wrong people. In most cases, there was no acknowledgement of arrest. Seized and tortured individuals were killed and surreptitiously disposed of so that their bodies disappeared permanently. Or else, depending on the country and circumstance, they were released to exist as living testimonials to the terrors awaiting anyone who got in the way of the state. As Sister Dianna Ortiz, a victim of torture in Guatemala explained: “So often it is assumed that torture is conducted for the purpose of gaining information. It is much more often intended to threaten populations into silence. What I was to endure was a message, a warning to others—not to oppose, to remain silent, and to yield to power without question” (Ortiz, 2011, pp. xi–xii).

The disappearance meant that family and friends could not properly mourn. They did not know if loved ones were alive or dead and so could not commence separation from and incorporation of the missing. As was the case with Braun, to decide

that the disappeared was indeed dead could be interpreted by the self or others as a betrayal and a psychic killing. At the same time, associations with the disappeared put grievers at risk and at even greater remove from the wider community, impairing further their ability to mourn and, ultimately, to incorporate and surmount the loss.

This pervasive terror throughout society went beyond the traumas typically conceptualized as causing post-traumatic stress disorder in its longevity and its pervasiveness. For, as with many forms of ongoing violence, the trauma is not "post." It causes an ongoing sense of anxiety and terror, in which disaster can reoccur at any moment. While feeding off the darkest recesses of the human mind, this anxiety and terror is nonetheless based in deep realities and may in fact be life saving. At the same time, it cannot be symbolized adequately in an environment where to acknowledge the terror openly puts one's self at mortal risk of imprisonment, torture, or death. One group of activists described this dynamic as the "silence rule,' including extreme dissociative phenomena, the denial of reality, learning problems, and the impoverishment of fantasy life" (p. 151).

Efforts to deal therapeutically with this psychic terror led to modifications of traditional treatment prescriptions. These socially engaged analysts came to reject the concept of analytic neutrality while continuing to struggle with the need and their duty to respect their patients' autonomy. In the first place, the analysts were not themselves immune to the terror. One of Hollander's informants describes how, every time a car stopped outside his office, he would go into a panic, afraid that the authorities were coming to arrest him again. Further, in order to advance a cure, these analysts implicitly supported their patients' search for truth and for effective verbalizations of that truth, a socially devalued and dangerous undertaking. At the same time, these analysts remained aware of the possibility of betrayal by a patient, a possibility that cannot have failed to influence the treatment.

Much of the clinical work of these analysts went beyond the traditional psychoanalytic setting. One analyst provided treatment to children and other family members of the *desaparecidos* by meeting anonymously in public parks. Others provided psychological support through group treatment of

members of activist groups such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the organization of mothers of the *desaparecidos* who defied the Argentine dictatorship and terror by demonstrating weekly in the Plaza de Mayo for their children to be released or accounted for. By supporting this activism, these analysts helped to defy the “silence rule” and to symbolize the terror that poisoned psychic life under the dictatorship.

The Latin American analysts portrayed by Hollander appear to have built theoretically upon a hybrid of classical Freudian thought and contemporary neo-Kleinian thinking. They differ from earlier psychoanalytic radicals such as Reich and from psychoanalytically informed social critics such as Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown in rejecting a psychoanalytic utopianism constructed upon the liberation of Eros and the fulfillment of desire. Instead, these Latin American analysts built their perspective upon an awareness of the duality of human existence, recognizing the ever-present and never-conquered capacity for human evil clearly visible in the agents of the terror state and in the many who, either by benefiting from the dictatorship or maintaining the socially mandated silence, were complicit in the state’s crimes. They came to value those forms of social control that could limit the political expression of human evil. As I read Hollander’s dialogues, these thinkers built their psychoanalytic activism upon four fundamental principles: the centrality of human agency in individual and social development; the role of caring for others in living a meaningful life; the need to face personal and social truth, however unpleasant; and the need for society to be regulated by a uniform adherence to the rule of law that constrains everyone, including the powerful. Unlike earlier radical psychoanalysts, and many political radicals of various orientations, the struggle for human rights and for the rule of law became central to their vision of social activism.

The abandonment of utopian visions, while strengthening the commitment to human rights as a central element of any desirable society, may also have weakened the possibility of fundamentally critiquing the capitalist social relations that survived the Latin American dictatorships. It is as if justice and human rights were in tension with the instinct to create a fundamentally new society, one not based on market relations

of inequality and domination. Thus, when a new Latin left arose in Venezuela and other Latin American countries, these activists, like much of the rest of the radical left in those countries, applauded, despite this new left's accommodation of the largely capitalist nature of their economies. So far, dreams of truly radical transformation have disappeared along with social movements calling for fundamentally non-market-based social relations. It remains to be seen if more radical social critique can successfully coexist with a radical politics that puts human rights at the center of political praxis.

In presenting her account of the lives and thoughts of these activist Latin American psychoanalysts, Hollander is not interested in providing us only with a history lesson. She believes that their experience of social activism followed by disappointment, of social hope followed by confrontations with incipient and full-blown authoritarianism and terror regimes, has direct applicability to post-9/11 United States. The last third of the book makes that connection. Just as a worship of the "free market," with its antipathy to protection of the less powerful and less fortunate, brought misery to Latin American workers, so the neo-liberal consensus solidified under President Bill Clinton led to increased inequality in the U.S. And just as repressive forces in Latin America used the specter of guerilla "terrorism" as a pretext for destroying civil society, so too reactionary forces in the U.S. used the post-9/11 specter of terrorism to reduce traditional civil liberties, unleash the "dark side"—including torture—in government actions, and marginalize progressive forces and traditions in the U.S. As Hollander tells it, the hope of social change that preceded the Latin American dictatorships and the subsequent disillusionment has an analogy in the enthusiasm surrounding the election of Barack Obama and the disappointment that followed when change failed to materialize. The U.S., Hollander argues, is at risk of a major turn toward authoritarianism that may or may not resemble the shifts that she chronicles in Latin America.

Hollander draws parallels between the activism of socially aware psychoanalysts in Latin America and attempts to create a socially aware psychoanalysis in the U.S. She describes the leading role of a number of psychoanalysts in the struggle that took shape against psychologist participation in the Bush

administration's torture program and that posed a major challenge to the American Psychological Association's collusion in the use of torture. Still, a culture of impunity now protects U.S. torturers, psychologists included, as it once protected Latin American torturers, and the movement against it has failed so far to transform it (Soldz, 2010, 2011). (Disclosure: I make a brief appearance in this section.)

Hollander points to a number of other efforts to undo the radical split in U.S. psychoanalysis between the clinical setting and the social arena. Unfortunately, as a participant in these efforts, I found the presentation in this part of the book unconvincing. Unlike the picture Hollander portrays of Latin American psychoanalysts actively engaged with mass movements for social change, the efforts in the United States—beyond individuals' participation in rallies—are to this point small and largely isolated from broader social movements. Alas, the most striking feature of U.S. society in recent years is the one-sided nature of its class struggle. While the United States has seen an immense expansion of inequality and a concerted attack on its already inadequate welfare state, hardly any well-organized forces oppose these trends. U.S. unions are weak and have almost entirely lost a spirit of militancy, acting as if buying an ad for a Democratic candidate can replace mass action. And the Democrats, the closest analog in the U.S. to a social democratic party, have largely replaced their interest in alleviating the worst effects of the free market with an aspiration to manage more efficiently the dismantling of the social compact that largely governed the United States after the Second World War. As for the psychoanalytic profession, the potential impact of a socially aware psychoanalysis in the U.S. is dramatically reduced by the current marginalization of analysis in the U.S. mental health system as well as in the culture at large.

The future of the United States may well depend upon creation of mass social movements to challenge the reigning right-wing ideology and its accompanying attacks upon the lives and living standards of the majority. Should such movements arise, the seeds described by Hollander may indeed sprout into a socially engaged psychoanalysis capable of analyzing and of helping to transform the dominant ideologies and structures that otherwise may generate a uniquely U.S. variety of authori-

tarianism. Given the current position of psychoanalysis, a socially engaged psychoanalysis will likely be created only as part of a larger critical, activist psychology, broadly defined, rather than as a separate psychoanalytic entity. Such a creation will likely supplement psychoanalytic concerns regarding unconscious motivational processes with ideas derived from other critical currents in psychology as well as in contemporary thought and social action. By contrast, when U.S. psychoanalysis asserts its intellectual independence from other currents of thought, it shows a strong tendency toward solipsistic forms of discourse that define and appeal to in-groups rather than extend outward to the broader interested public and to society as a whole.

Seeing our Latin American colleagues face the terrible crises in their society ethically, with dignity and with honor, never losing their ability to look inward and even at times to laugh at themselves, sets a stirring example, an ego ideal, for those of us trying to create a critical, activist psychology and an alternative psychoanalysis in the (declining) heart of the empire. Beyond the inspiring examples of these brave, intelligent individuals, we should read Hollander's book, not because of the answers it contains, but because of the questions it raises for psychoanalytic theory and practice. These questions include: the relationship between socio-economic structures and personal psychological functioning; the social and personal origins of the potential for authoritarian behavior and for participatory democratic behavior; the roots of social collusion and denial; the role of social action in healthy human development; and the proper balance between daily life and social activism. These questions are central to understanding and confronting the present and the future in both the U.S. and Latin America. These questions, which get to the heart of what it means to be a human being living in society, may never be definitively answered, but they must be confronted by anyone striving to understand and transform a society that increasingly fails to satisfy the basic needs, material and spiritual, of its citizens.

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